

behold the sparkle of champagne by poisonquier

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Hunger Games

Language: English

Characters: Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers & Joyce Byers, Jonathan Byers & Will Byers

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2021-05-28

Updated: 2021-07-26

Packaged: 2022-03-31 10:29:22

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 3

Words: 10,687

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

If there's one thing Jonathan Byers knows how to do, in any universe, it's how to protect his brother.

Or Hunger Games starring the Stranger Things cast, and Jonathan as Katniss Everdeen...

1. It won't be him if it can be me...

Author's Note:

I don't know what this is, so you don't get to either.

He wakes up to the same thing he's woken up to countless mornings before – his little brother curled up against him like a housecat. It's something he never tires of and hopes his brother never outgrows. It's still early, still dark out, but it's Jonathan's usual time to get up anyway. Slowly, he eases his way out from under his brother, and silently gets dressed. Will stirs for a second, but the heat from the comforter drags him back under once more. Carefully, Jonathan climbs out the bedroom window and onto the grass, wet under his socks with dew. He creeps along the side of the house and stays crouched until the house is no longer in view, plopping down to put his shoes on. He doesn't bother with the laces, just tucks them under the tongues and hurries on, knowing that Mick will already be there, because Mick's always there. A flash of white has him ducking behind a barrel, holding his breath. The peacekeeper doesn't even notice, complacent in the knowledge that District 011 has been beaten down – if only they knew.

He keeps to the shadier parts of the district for the rest of the way though.

He gets to the gate and waits, listening for the soft buzz of electricity, satisfied when he hears nothing. He crawls through the hole and retrieves his gear from the hollow of an oak tree.

He whistles softly to alert Mick of his arrival, and goes to their usual spot, where she's already waiting.

“You’re late.” She says; getting up off the log she’d been resting on.

“I’ve been here the whole time.” He lies blatantly and cheerfully. Mick is not amused.

“Let’s just get on with this.”

Jonathan’s friendship with Mick is one borne from survival and

nothing more. They're both loners-by-choice, preferring their own company to a great many people's. To earn their trust is akin to winning the lottery. They'd met in a tessara line, the youngest people in it by far, and bonded over experiences that got them there. Mick, being two years older, took Jonathan under her wing and told him about the hole in the fence, asked him the fated Question – "You hunt?" and the rest is history.

Two emotionally closed off people brought together by something highly illegal and possibly suicidal – as God intended.

Mick sets up fresh snares and checks on old ones in complete silence and gestures that he goes high, which he does, allowing him to spot Bambi and his mother grazing contentedly, unaware of their killer taking aim.

It's a beautiful shot, killing the doe and fatally wounding the calf. A few years ago, Jonathan would've barfed at the sight, but now he understands, they have to die so he can keep living – if not for himself, then for Will, Will and his mom, who doesn't like this, but can't fight it.

They're lucky today, bringing home more meat than they can carry, but it's money in their pockets and food in their bellies, and one more day to breathe easy.

Tomorrow is tomorrow, and who knows what the light of day will bring.

*

The next day should be business as usual, but Jonathan wakes up with a full stomach and a lump in his throat, because it's The Reaping, and it's his least favourite day of the year. It's the day he has to watch people get on that stage knowing he'll probably never see them again. District 011 hasn't won the Games in 24 years. He knows with every year, his number gets higher, that Mick's gets higher still, but that's not the reason for the lump – this year, Will's eligible, this year his baby brother's name is in that pot, only once to be sure, but once is more than he wants. He wishes for last year, when Will was eleven, wishes for time to stand still just for a second, but the cheap watch on the nightstand ticks on, and Jonathan can do

nothing about it.

He gets up to meet Mick, not for hunting, too big a risk today, but just in case.

Her usual 'fro is smoothed down and braided into a bun, and she looks almost sweet like this, with all her rough edges sanded away. He'd never say that out loud of course, in fear of broken ribs, but privately he thinks it.

She must still put on her dress, a new one, which she's unhappy about, wasted money, but the one she'd worn to previous Reapings was both too small and too frayed for an event as *prestigious* as this. He finds that no dress will ever capture her truth as what she's wearing now does, jeans and a holey t-shirt, and she's more beautiful than any other girl in the district by far. He doesn't see her as anything more than a fellow survivor, but he knows it to be true.

They go up to the Mill, which has the best view of their home, as they've done since her first Reaping, back when he'd been too young for it, but feared for her nonetheless. They take in everything, from the mine to the Square, as if saying goodbye. It's Mick's last year and he hopes she makes it, hopes with everything he has that they don't call her name, hopes that they won't take the one friend he has away, secretly wondering if she wants the same. They sit in silence until the sun begins her slow ascent into the sky and they part ways like strangers.

Their silence says more than words could ever try to.

*

He gets back home and sneaks back into bed, pretending to stir as Will wakes up. His brother is a willowy thing, tiny like their mom, but still *inconceivably* 12 years old. His pyjamas are Jonathan's old pair, still too long at the bottom, and the sight has him tearing up. He doesn't let Will see, just presses his chin into the other boy's shoulder, and takes in his scent. Some of it is similar to his own – like the soap they use to treat their clothes and the smell of coal that seems to cling to all the Seam kids no matter how much times they wash. There's also the tiny variations that make Will's scent unique to him,

like the berries he crushes to make paint for his art and something else that Jonathan hasn't tried hard to identify, something undeniably Will.

His breath hitches at the thought that this might be the last time he gets to do this, and the thought sends a vicious chill down his spine.

That's *not* going to happen. Not to Will – no matter what.

“It's time to get up.” His mom appears in the doorway, quiet as always – family trait, Jonathan expects – clutching at her sleeves in a way Jonathan recognises as anxiety.

“I've got Will.” He reassures her, knowing that this day is hard for her, knows she knows how much times his name is in that bowl, so he wants to do anything he can to take as much of the burden off her as he can.

“Okay.” She sounds unsure, fingers slipping into a hole in her sleeve and picking at it.

“Why don't you see what's for breakfast?”

She nods and scurries away, happy for something to do, something routine she can lose herself in so as not to think about anything else.

Jonathan sighs and pokes his brother in his sensitive spot, knowing it never fails to fully rouse his brother.

“You're a dick, Jonathan.” is the cheery greeting his brother offers as his eyes open. Jonathan chuckles; having heard worse before.

“All part of my charm.” Jonathan responds, pulling the blankets off Will completely to prevent the boy from drifting off again. “Bathroom's free.” He says in the face of Will's glare and Will jumps up, rushing to it, knowing that it's a privilege to get first dibs, a privilege he's never felt he's earned, as all he's done was be born last, but he's learned he can't fight stubborn.

When Will disappears into the bathroom, Jonathan sets out the ill-fitting suit his brother will be wearing, as well as his own, both his dad's, which Jonathan hates, but has no choice to wear.

Will makes quick work in the bathroom, feet still wet as he pads into the bedroom, stopping short as he sees the suits, swallowing visibly, hands going white against his towel.

“I forgot what day it was.” He says simply, voice shaky and Jonathan hugs him, not minding the wet head pressing against his stomach, relishing this feeling for what could be the last time, as Jonathan has always tried to be nothing but a hard-eyed realist when it came to things like this.

“It’ll be okay. Your name’s only in there once.”

“That’s only because you wouldn’t let me take tesserae.” Will mumbles into the fabric of his shirt.

“I’d make that same choice a hundred times, kid. Don’t you forget that.”

“What about the hundred and first time?” Will remarks as he pulls away, a small smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Oh-ho-ho, aren’t you the smart ass this morning? Get dressed.” He says softly, ruffling his brother’s hair and heading to the bathroom. He doesn’t much like to think of the hundred and first time, because the 101st time is the one where he’s dead.

He showers quickly, not opening the hot water, saving it for his mom, and gets out with goose-bumps all across his skin. He dries off and spares a passing glance at himself in the mirror, wondering as he always does on this day what people in other districts might make of him.

He’s this skinny, underfed kid from one of the reject districts, with limp hair and a permanent scowl etched on his face. He wonders if they’d even consider him a threat, as someone to look out for, and decides, ultimately, probably not. He wonders if that could be a help or a hindrance in a game like this – to be undermined.

He hopes he never finds out.

The sound of his mom and Will in the kitchen drifts towards him as he exits the bathroom, which allows him the chance to dress

privately. His suit, such an innocuous thing, is laid out exactly where he left it, waiting for him to put it on. He hates it, hates a bundle of cheaply made fabric like it's a living person, for what it symbolises, what it means. Suits mean Reapings or funerals, which are both the same thing in this district.

Still, he slides into the shirt and buttons it up, because that's all he knows to do. When he's done with everything else, he puts on the tie, making a perfect knot and pushes it up against his throat, like a noose, brings it back down again and breathes. He puts the blazer on and smoothes down the lapels, watching his hands lose their shakiness as he does. This is why he likes dressing in private – to allow himself the chance to fall apart alone and pick himself up again. He takes one last breath and propels himself into the kitchen, squeezing his brother's shoulder in passing and kissing his mom's cheek. He grabs a slice of bread, stale but edible and drags some butter onto it, sitting down to eat.

For as long as they can, they ignore the elephant in the room, just pretending to be a normal family sitting down to breakfast.

Soon though, there are no dishes and no more jokes, nothing to do but face reality. Will fiddles with his tie, twirling the tail around his finger and watches as it unravels. He does this a few times before he manages to look his brother in the eye. "What's it gonna be like?" He asks tentatively, softly, as only Byers boys can.

"Fast. Out of control, yet completely structured. You'll feel like a sheep, being corralled, then it'll be over, and then you come home."

Jonathan glosses over the other part, the middle – the sickness in your stomach as you wait, wait for your name, wait for your friend's name, wait for someone you know, the cold grip of fear as Flo Eagon's manicured hands dip into that clear glass bowl. He doesn't want to think about it, doesn't want Will to go into this with that on his mind.

"What if it's me? What if it's my name she pulls out of there?" He sounds so scared, so broken that Jonathan has to get up from his chair and be close to his brother.

He places his hands on his brother's shoulders and looks directly into those big hazel eyes. He squeezes lightly, voice dripping with sincerity and an underlying promise.

"It won't be you."

*

Will holds his hand all the way to the Square and it's Jonathan's only real tether to the world right now. Most Reapings for him are greyed out, barely remembered spaces in time, the only moments in his life where he's not hunting or with his family. He tries to block most of it out, letting only the important stuff seep into his brain.

Peacekeepers are lined up and down the Square, weapons prominent; a stark reminder to everyone that rule-breaking will not be tolerated on this day. Jonathan feels Will's hands tighten around his and he squeezes back to let the kid know everything will be okay,

Will spots his friends, dressed in better made suits, and waves in greeting. The three boys wave back glumly, all three wide-eyed and terrified. Jonathan doesn't blame them, he imagines he looked much the same his first out too.

He spots Mick with her family, in the dress he knows she hates and offers up a tiny nod, which she returns before hustling her siblings along.

When they're close enough, Jonathan sees they're being sectioned off by age, so he holds Will back a second longer and hugs him. By nature, he's not an affectionate person, but Will has always been his exception. He hugs him as long as he can and backs away when he notices a Peacekeeper's itchy trigger-finger twitch.

He steps back a little, but keeps a hand cupped around the younger boy's neck and looks him in the eye once more. "It won't be you." He promises again, knowing that it could very well be a lie, but something in his gut makes him say it anyway.

They part ways, and a peacekeeper leads Jonathan to the group of 16 year olds, and since he's one of the last ones, he ends up right

against the barrier, which means he's right next to the mayor's son, Steve Harrington, an obnoxious 17 year old if Jonathan's ever known one, but he tries to ignore that, because there are bigger issues to worry about. He looks up at the stage, done up as it is every year with banners and balloons, a weak offering when you compare it to district 001, but that doesn't matter, not really.

The two glass bowls are what captures one's attention anyway, evenly spaced out on 2 marble columns brought out especially for the occasion. A mic stand stands equidistant between the two, with a sole ribbon tied around it, in an effort to maintain a festive illusion. There are three chairs on stage, two on one side and one on the other – the two for the mayor and last surviving victor of the Games on one side, and one for the Capitol representative on the other. Capitol people never seem to notice the obvious divide, *so* utterly oblivious to everything that's wrong with the situation.

The clock-tower behind the stage –calling it a *tower* is a stretch as it's really only barely bigger than the buildings next to it – strikes 12:00 and the mayor, ever prompt stands to deliver the stalwart speech that Jonathan mostly blocks out. He really does not have to listen to this, as it won't affect him one way or the other. No one's ever died in the Games because they *didn't* know why they were fighting, so he doesn't give a crap.

The history concludes, and Flo, in bright yellows and vivacious pinks comes forward and tries to get everyone to join her in a rendition of the anthem, but no one so much as utters a peep. She flushes hotly for a second, but shakes it off and smiles for the cameras with a set of dazzlingly white teeth. She unloads the standard spiel about what an honour this is, about the pride one should feel and Jonathan only refrains from rolling his eyes because he knows the cameramen wait for that, as well as the peacekeepers, and he's in no mood to get tazed today.

Finally, she wraps it up with a showy clap of her hands.

“Alright, here we go.” She proclaims, her excitement probably substituting for everyone else's in the district. “And as always,” here she mugs for the camera a bit, and says the line Jonathan hates above all else. “May the odds be ever in your favour.”

She walks to the first bowl, glitter shaking loose from her dress with every step and twirls her hand obscenely before diving in, Jonathan's stomach diving with it.

Not Mick , he begs silently, hand pressed tightly against his leg as he waits for Flo to announce it. Every step back to the mic feels like an eon has passed, until finally she's there and reading the name.

“Jane Ives.” It’s not a name Jonathan recognises, which means it’s not Mick, and he finds breathing comes a little easier with that titbit of information, until he sees the girl who’s walking towards Flo. She’s this little slip of a thing, bird-like and willowy and there’s this ethereal quality about her that Jonathan can’t quite place. The thing that sticks out most about her though, is that she’s Will’s age.

She walks up to the stage with straight shoulders and head high, but the barest tremble attaches itself to her lips, betraying, ever so slightly, the fear she must be feeling. He can admire her bravery though, has to push the heel of his hand against his thigh to stop from clapping. This is her funeral march after all.

There’s a rumble of discontent from a few town people, who are never happy when a child is picked, but otherwise, it is quiet as Jane makes her way to the stage.

“Well, aren’t you a beauty?” Flo says, sounding a touch uncomfortable to be dealing with someone so young. Maybe there’s a heart under that makeup after all.

She helps Jane up the last few steps and tries to twirl her, but the girl is stiff and doesn’t allow it. She moves to the side where the girls’ bowl stands, and keeps her hands at the back of her, as if in fear that she will be made to twirl again.

“Right, as much of an honour as this is for you, Jane, I would be remiss if I didn’t afford someone else the opportunity to have this honour bestowed upon them, so... any volunteers?” It might be Jonathan’s imagination, but he thinks there’s an edge of desperation in the woman’s voice, a plea for someone to volunteer, but no one does – no one ever does. Still, Flo waits a beat longer than she should, and when it becomes clear that no one will be the girl’s

saviour, she rallies and goes back to her shiny porcelain default.

“Let’s give Jane a hand, huh?” Not so much as a finger twitch.

“Oo...kay. Ooh, boys, your turn.” She says cheerily, eyes a little too round, twitching ever so slightly as her hopes are dashed, probably working on a draft for a district change in her head as she goes to the boys’ bowl. Probably hoping for a glamorous district too.

Another obnoxious twirl, another swooping dive and one more desperate plea.

Not Will.

Her walk feels doubly long this time, with each step an eternity, a cement block in his gut. His palms are sweating and his heart is doing a quickstep in his chest by the time Flo makes her way to the mic again.

It would seem he only gets to save one person with a desperate plea because the second Flo’s lips start to make the shape of the W, Jonathan already knows.

Still, his heart sinks and his stomach drops, and there’s a loud buzzing in his ears as Flo finishes the name.

“Will Byers.”

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Will’s feet are both on the stage when Jonathan gains enough of his wits about him to realize what’s happening – what shouldn’t be happening, because Will’s name is in there *once*, this doesn’t make any sense, it should be him, not Will, it should be him.

Like a light-bulb, it clicks on and he realizes something – it *should* be him.

He steps out onto the pathway, back straight and head high, reminiscent of the brave girl seconds before him and utters the fatal words: “I volunteer.” His voice is strangely clear in the silence that follows two 12 year olds being reaped, but it makes him sound

tougher, which is good, because he needs every tough point he can get right now.

His knees feel like jelly and his heart is thrumming loudly in his ears, but he doesn't let that show, making his way slowly to the stage.

"I haven't asked for volunteers yet, child." Flo reproaches, but it's purely pro-forma and they both know it.

He simply reiterates his statement and keeps walking forward.

Looking at him, one wouldn't say he's nervous or scared, but it's simply the same thing it is when you watch a duck in the water, serene on the surface, but the turmoil lies just below. He walks past Will as he's ushered down the stairs, looking stunned and horrified, brushing his fingers lightly against his brother's own.

"I simply *must* know your name." Flo demands as soon as he's on the stage proper and shoves the mic in his face before he can process the question.

He gives himself a second by pushing the mic away from his face and takes the second to collect himself.

Dear God what had he done?

"Jonathan." He says simply, not wanting to give up the ghost just yet. Flo doesn't let him get away with that though.

"Jonathan..." She presses and he's forced to reveal his ace.

"Jonathan Byers." He admits, after a beat.

"That must have been your brother then." Flo prods, hoping to get something out of this new development, but Jonathan won't give her the satisfaction.

"Yes." Is all he says, all he offers up, before he takes another page from Jane Ives' book and steps to the side to avoid more questions.

"Well, why don't we give a hand for Will's big brother, yeah?" Flo tries, but is again met with blank stares and empty faces.

A man in the back raises an arm, fist clenched and places it across his chest, and in unison, the rest of the district follows, dropping it to the side immediately after. Jonathan recognises it as the Burial Salute, and he feels both honoured and terrified seeing it aimed at him.

He and Jane repeat the motion, and Flo looks on, seemingly confused.

In his peripheral, he sees Jim Hopper drop his own arm, and Jonathan's guts twist – not even their supposed mentor thinks they're gonna come home in anything but a couple of boxes.

Great.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

An update? At a reasonable time? From me?
Miraculous.

Don't get used to it

When Jonathan's alone again, he allows the tremors he kept at bay to rise to the surface and takes several heaving breaths as he struggles to get air properly into his lungs. He braces himself against the door, knows he'll get a few minutes while the peacekeepers gather all the people who'll want to say goodbye to him together, so he'll take that few moments to break down and pull himself together.

He's in it now – he's a friggin' tribute. He's no longer a spectator, but the main event. He's gonna die at the hands of some (right now) faceless stranger and his mother will lose her mind and Will might never recover from this and this is not happening, this is some lucid nightmare that his psyche cooked up because he's fearing this exact scenario, and he'll wake up and this will all be over.

He pinches his wrists and bites his cheek and tries to get himself to wake up, knows that this is real, knows, but he clings onto hope, because that is the only thing he has to cling onto now.

He takes a deep breath and remembers himself – he is Jonathan Byers, he's got this.

He sinks into his chair and breathes for a while, gets himself under control.

He can break later, right now, outside that door, there's still people who need him to be strong.

He's got this.

*

His mom is the first one through the door, hugging him before he can

even get a word in, crushing him with her embrace. He takes in her scent, vanilla, mixed through with bath soap and her trademark smell of smoke. He buries his nose in that and feels the tension slip away, letting the smell take him back to simpler days where his biggest worries were skinned knees and his dad's anger.

With the tension somewhat abated, he can hear his mom muttering under her breath, simultaneously berating him and thanking him. It's all very confusing for him, but he doesn't let himself out of the cocoon of her arms. Until the grip on his arms turns painful and his mother makes him look her in the eyes.

“What were you thinking, Jonathan?! Do you realize what a mess you've gotten yourself into?!”

He knows she's snapping at him because she's scared, but so is he, so he retaliates with anger too, knowing that the worst thing they could possibly do is spend what most likely will be their last few minutes together fighting.

“You'd rather have it be Will in this situation, is that what you're saying?!”

“You know that's not what I'm saying! I just...” She seems to remember herself and the anger seeps out of her like air from a balloon. “I didn't want it to be either of you.” She says, and her hand is cupping his jaw, thumb caressing his cheek.

“I can handle it better than he'd be able to.” He lies, knowing that this isn't a situation anyone would handle themselves favourably in.

She lets the lie stand for a while, knowing that he needs to believe it more than she does right now, so she just nods along as if it makes sense.

“You do have a good head on your shoulders.” She admits, pulling him in for another hug, pressing her chin into the bones of his shoulder, trying hard not to think of decapitations and her boy together, failing miserably.

“Take care of Will.” He tells her when she releases him, which is so

like him, always thinking about other people ahead of himself, as that's the person he was raised to be.

“Come back to Will.” She admonishes, trying to make sure he doesn’t give up before he’s even played the game.

“Try not to work too late, okay? Will can’t be trusted alone with the sugar.” He says, with a faraway look in his eyes that Joyce doesn’t like at all. She grabs his jaw and makes him look her in the eyes, tries to put as much authority in them as she can manage. “Jonathan Byers, you listen to me. You are going to come home to your brother, you are going to come home to me. You’re not allowed to give up. You are not allowed to quit.”

His eyes dart away from hers and there’s a pensive look on his face that she does not like.

“That girl is twelve years old mom. You don’t think someone out there wants *her* to come home?”

That’s what this is – protective instincts.

“Jonathan.” She breathes, voice hitching on the last syllable, but the door swings open before she can say anything else.

“Time’s up.” The dispassionate voice of the peacekeeper barks, undoing her.

She doesn’t move, trying to get her boy, her pure, *pure* angel to look at her again.

“No one else is going to care how old she is, Jonathan.” What she says next puts the last nail in the coffin, but will hopefully keep him alive a little longer. “Someone’s gotta watch out for her.” She says as a heavy hand grabs her by the shoulder, tugging her away from her firstborn.

“I love you, baby.” She shouts as the peacekeeper all but tosses her out. She tries to get one last look, but the door is already shut. She doesn’t even know if he heard that last part or not. She dusts herself off and glares at the peacekeeper, preferring anger to the soul-crushing madness that waits just at the edges of her psyche.

She gives the peacekeeper one last scathing look before marching away, trying to keep the shaking in her hands at bay.

///

Will feels frozen. His heart feels like it's trying to claw its way out of his chest and his lungs are failing him. His breaths are short and ragged and he needs to, he needs to – *sit down right now*. His legs are jelly and he's not sure which way is up anymore.

“You okay man?” The face in front of him is blurry and he tries to focus on it, but is struggling to. A hand on his shoulder is guiding him to somewhere, and he can feel the ground getting closer. When he's properly situated, his breathing becomes a little easier and he's able to see who it is.

It's Lucas.

“You back with me, bud?” He asks, worry etched into every line on his face.

Afraid to talk, Will only nods. Lucas offers him a bottle of water, where he got it from, Will doesn't know, but he sips from it gratefully.

He was almost sent into the arena. He was almost sent into the arena to be killed. He was almost sent to the arena to be killed after Jonathan promised him it wouldn't happen. Jonathan who kept his promise. Jonathan who might die. Then something else pierces through the fog now that he's a little hydrated again – Jane's in the Games too.

Jane, one of his best friends, and Jonathan, his brother. Water spills onto his hands as they start shaking again, but he takes a deep breath and tries to calm down.

“Where's Mike and Dustin?” He asks, standing up and handing Lucas his water back.

“With Jane probably. Mike about lost his mind when her name was called. Wanted to volunteer so bad you could see it on his face. I think he might've when you were called too, if, you know...”

Will does know. His idiotic brother and his damn hero complex.

No survival instincts, that one. (He thinks of the deer carcasses with the arrows perfectly through the eye and reconsiders.)

“Let’s go see Jane.” He directs Lucas, knowing he needs more time before he can see his brother, knows that saying goodbye to her will be a lot easier than saying goodbye to Jonathan, knows that’s a horrible thought too.

There’s a slightly longer line to see Jane than there is for Jonathan (no big shock), but Mike and Dustin have yet to go in, so they cut to the front easily enough. Mike is the first to pull him into a hug with Dustin immediately piling on.

“Thank God for Jonathan.” Dustin says, and if it were anyone else, the kid would probably be laid out on the floor, but it’s Dustin, who doesn’t have a malicious bone in his body, so Will leaves it alone. Lucas doesn’t, cuffing Dustin around the ear with an incredulous expression on his face.

“Way to be cool, man.” He says, but before it can devolve into a classic battle of wits, the door sweeps open and Benny Hammond walks out, looking wan. He turns in the direction of Jonathan’s door and goes to stand in that line as Will is pushed into Jane’s little farewell room.

She’s picking at the hem of her dress, picked out by her aunt, and looks hollowed out in a way that makes Will feel wrong inside. (How could no one volunteer in her place? How has a district become *that* beaten down?)

“Hey.” Mike says, voice soft, like someone talking to a frightened animal. His hand settles onto the one she’s picking at her dress with, stopping it in its tracks.

“Hi.” She says, voice strong despite the softness.

“Don’t let that mouth-breather get you down.” He whispers, reminding her of the word they’ve used on multiple occasions to talk about President Brenner. (In the safety of their homes, of course,

where no one can hear them.)

“Too late for that.” She says, lifting her head up and looking directly at all of them.

“This is not fair.” She says, and everyone knows she’s saying this solely for Will’s benefit, because it’s true. Two of the most important people in his life are in this horrible, twisted situation, with no better options forthcoming.

He pushes Mike gently out of the way and crouches in front of Jane. “No, it’s not fair – but I need you to promise me one thing though.” He pauses as he tries to get the words out, knowing what he has to say, but still having trouble with it – he knows how seriously she takes promises, as something to be revered, something unbreakable, the one thing she prizes above all else. A promise is sacred.

“Try to win.”

He knows what he’s doing, but this is Jane and she’s , she’s just Jane, and there’s no one else like her anywhere, and he can’t bear the thought of losing her, losing a person as special as her, but the words taste like ash in his mouth even as he says them.

Mike gives his shoulder a squeeze and leans across him to hug both of them, leading to his second group hug of the day. His ear is pressed against her mouth so he hears when she says the fateful words.

“I promise.”

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Mick likes to think she’s pretty chill, likes to believe that everything just rolls off her. So what if she’s a Seam brat with a dead dad and one friend? So what if her mom works more than she sleeps? So what if her baby sister, who’s Jonathan’s age, is ready to pop out two more mouths to feed? So what? She likes to think that her mom should have named her Zen, because she’s so chill.

This though? This, she doesn’t know how to handle. She’s a tough nut, but Jonathan’s been there for her since she was a tiny ten year

old and this is the one thing she can't protect him from. She can't protect him from the choice she knows he'd make over and over again, can't protect him from *himself* and that bugs her, because he's always been that way, always thinking about others before he remembers to think about himself. *He'd* been the one to put himself up for tesserae because his mother was struggling with rent. He's always been a self-sacrificing little shit.

She barges into her house, loots through her drawers until she finds the item she needs and storms back to the line, directly behind Little Will. He doesn't seem to notice her, wrapped up in his own thoughts as he is, which is just fine by her, as she doesn't even know what she's supposed to say at this point.

As he disappears behind the doors to say goodbye, or at least an *until then*, Mick pulls out the pin and studies it, swiping her thumb over the tarnished silver, the only thing of value she owns. It was her dad's from back when he lived in Town, back before he fell in love with a woman his family didn't approve of, back when he was chased out of the house and this was the *only* thing he thought to grab. Her fingers clench around the cool steel as she wavers, wondering if she can really give it to him.

"Mick, kid, this is more than a pin to me. Before you kids, this was the one thing in my life I could count on. This was how I survived long enough to meet your mom. It may not look like much, isn't much really, but this badge, it kept me safe." He flips it to her and she catches it, looking down at the creature trapped in the circle. It looks like a bat, like the ones she'll see in the early mornings when she's hunting, blending into the endless black of the sky. What her dad's saying makes no sense, because this tiny little thing can't really protect anyone, but her dad's more lucid than he's been in a while, so she's not going to waste this precious time with him asking dumb questions, instead closing her fingers around the trinket and looking her dad in his yellowing eyes.

"Dad, why give this to me?"

"I'm dying, Mick, I know that much. She's given me as much protection as she can. She's gonna keep you safe now."

She tries to give it back to him, but he refuses, closing her hand around it

once more with hands that shake in a way she doesn't like but can't do anything about.

"She's not magical, dad. She's – it's a pretty object dad, but I doubt it did anything for you that you didn't do for yourself."

"Shows how much you know." Her dad huffs, eyes at half-mast, try as he might to keep them open. "She's magic, alright." His eyes drift shut, but his hand, fever-warm, is still clutched around her own, trapping the bat effectively.

Mick lets the token lay flat on her palm and traces the outlines of the creature. The wings have little bumps on them that look like the heads of nails, she's decides, with no other way to describe those flat circles disrupting the smooth lines the wings make.

She'd looked up what it was once, when she'd still been at school – the stüdbat, said to bring good fortune and abundant protection to any who wears it.

Mick thinks it's all bullshit, but figures there's nothing wrong with a little superstition.

///

Jonathan's always been a wallflower, the kid in the peripherals – and he's always preferred that – so this is all new to him, and very jarring. He finds he doesn't like the attention, knows it's about to get worse, that soon all of Hawkins will be watching him, but at least *then* it won't be as obvious. He's been visited by more people today than he's ever *talked* to before and he finds getting onto that train seeming less like the worst thing he'll have to do today.

The hardest visit had been the butcher, who loves Jane Ives like a daughter and begs him to take care of her. "Now I know, Jane's a tough bird, tougher 'en she looks, lemme tell ya, but she ain't never killed before and ain't no telling what that'd do to her head. Boy, I's seen the shots you can make and you could do this district proud, I know it, but that little girl is a prize, son." He seems to realize then, that he's essentially telling Jonathan to kill himself if they both made it that far, and falls silent. A heavy hand falls on Jonathan's shoulder and the man crouches down so that they're eye level to each other –

“Y’all just watch out for each other out there, okay?”

And then he’d left and Jonathan finds he doesn’t feel any better about his situation.

Will’s next, looking similar to their mother, torn between gratitude and despair. He rushes to Jonathan and buries himself in his brother’s shoulder, sniffing wetly.

They don’t say anything to each other in this time, just stay wrapped up in each other, letting their beating hearts fill the silence. It’s only when their session ends that Will says something, knowing he has to get it out, has to say it in case he never gets to say it again – “I love you.”

Jonathan cups the back of his neck and presses their foreheads together, allowing a sad-but-real smile to form on his face. “Love you too.”

Last in – Jonathan knows it *has* to be last, because there’s no one else left to say goodbye to – *surely* – is Mick, still in the dress she hates, looking like she hates this more.

“You’re a real idiot, Byers.” She acknowledges right out, folding her arms and glaring.

“I’d do it again if I could.” He admits, knowing it to be truth even as he says it.

“If I had the right bits, I mighta saved your ass from yourself.”

“I wouldn’t want you to. You’ve got more people to worry about than I do.”

“I like you better.”

He smirks softly, shaking his head at the quip.

“You’d be the only one.”

She’s been stepping closer to him with every barb thrown and she’s right in front of him now, standing tall, so he stands too, because he

knows that's what she wants him to do.

She straightens his tie and buttons his blazer, making him look presentable before he's sent out there once more.

"Here." She says as she sticks something onto his lapel. It's a badge.

He doesn't ask why she's giving him her dad's pin, knows she won't give him an actual answer, thinks he gets it anyway. He just nods at her and she nods back, fixing his hair and stepping away.

"Don't make me have to break in a new partner, Byers." She says, jaw clenched and arms folded, nose twitching just slightly. (*I'll miss you* .)

"Please, like anyone could come close." He knocks his shoulder against hers and then the peacekeeper's there, guiding her out the door. (*I'll miss you too* .)

And then that's it, he's finally, terrifyingly alone.

///

The door shuts behind the final luck-wisher and Jane finds herself oddly relieved. She finds she can breathe again. She knows that in a matter of moments, she'll be driven to the station and away from all those people who she'd just been talking to, but tries not to think about that. She runs her hands down her dress and takes a deep breath, wishing (and at the same time berating herself for it) that she'd had an older sister to volunteer for her the same way Jonathan had done so selflessly. She knows it's not fair, but wishes it anyway. She doesn't want to do this anymore than, she expects, anyone who's been in this room before her has wanted to. She doesn't want to see anyone die, doesn't want to kill anyone, doesn't want to come home if it means Will's brother doesn't, *but* she'd made a promise to Will, in front of all of them, and a promise is something above reproach, something sacred and she has to honour it.

She has to try to win.

If worst comes to worst and she and Jonathan are the last two standing, she'll have kept her promise, upheld her word and die

knowing she'd done so.

The peacekeeper comes to get her and she sets her shoulders and walks out with her head high.

Notes for the Chapter:

if i owned Stranger Things, my favourite characters would have personalities. And Billy would have bit it without a character redemption arc... if that's what you'd call season 3, which i don't.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

So like, my gran's been ill for a while, like real bad and she finally... she's gone now. I don't know how to process it right now, so like this is my outlet, I guess. The anniversary of my grandpa's death is coming up too, so my mental health is pretty much... non-existent. I just, like, i know barely anyone is reading this, but... my grandparents were always too happy to brag about my writing, even when it sucked. So this is for them. I miss you.

It's Jonathan's (and he suspects Jane's too) first time in a car, and if the situation wasn't so dire, he'd probably enjoy it more. As it stands though, he still likes it, a great moment to cherish before he dies. It's a rush akin to the one he gets hunting and it's probably sad that he gets so excited over something so simple.

It ends too quickly though, with them pulling into the station roughly half an hour later, where they're quickly ushered onto the platform. They're made to stand still for a few photos , with Flo standing between them and smiling with her perfect white teeth and distracting clothes. Jonathan fidgets slightly, uncomfortable, but forces himself to relax, reminding himself once again that this is just the warm-up to the full-on circus that's waiting in the Capitol. Finally, they're released into the dubious safety of the train, the door hissing shut behind them.

Jonathan collapses into a seat and immediately loosens his tie and musses up his hair, releases a pent-up breath in relief.

God, he hates this.

He's actually looking forward to the Arena now, because at least there he won't have to *see* the cameras. That probably says a lot about him, but he doesn't really want to examine that too closely.

There's a soft clatter by his ear and out of the corner of his eye, he

sees Jane toeing her shoe off and kicking it against the train wall in apparent jubilation. She yanks her nylons off and bundles them into a little ball, offering them the same treatment she did her shoes, wiggles her toes.

It's at this moment he begins to like her, and at this moment he realizes he's utterly and completely fucked.

"That is no way for a young lady to behave." Flo interrupts his dark musings, picking up Jane's discarded clothing and setting them nicely on the seat next to the girl. "Or, for that matter a young man." She reaches up to him and straightens his tie, seemingly unfazed by his glare.

"Ah, pipe down, ya old windbag." Jim Hopper speaks up from his own booth, already nursing a drink, and clutching a cigarette between his lips. Flo tuts and goes over to Jim, plucking it out of his mouth and killing it in his drink.

She disappears with the glass into another part of the train as Hopper rolls his eyes.

"Don't mind her, she lives in a whole different world from us." Jonathan nods, making a big show of removing his tie completely and tossing it to the side, succeeding in his intended goal of getting Jane to laugh.

*

Lunch is an exuberant affair, with an entire booth dedicated to more food than Jonathan has ever seen in one place before. There's chicken and pot roast and foods Jonathan's never even heard of before, all fresh and warm, which is a novelty in the Seam. He almost doesn't want to eat anything when he thinks about what those people may be eating, but hunger wins out, and he finds himself finishing off two plates before his stomach begs mercy. There's dessert too, tarts and cakes and an assortment of sweets, and Jonathan wonders who's going to eat all that.

He feels anger at the injustice of it all, that *this* is how people in the Capitol *live* all the time when most people back home are lucky to if

they get even a quarter of this. He wipes at his face in disgust and doesn't go near the dessert table.

He gets up and walks down the train, to figure out the sleeping arrangements on this thing. He passes two perfectly serviceable cars before he finds the rooms, feeling inadequate in the face of all this opulence. Beneath his feet is a sand-coloured fleece carpet, invitingly soft under the worn soles of his shoes. He kicks them off and traipses barefoot into the room to explore it further. There's two easy chairs on one side of the coach, turned toward each other like he's seen displayed on Scott Clarke's talk show, so he assumes it must be a Capitol thing, they're a soft cream colour that has Jonathan wiping his palms against his trousers lest he get them dirty. He trails an arm of the chair unconsciously as he takes in the rest of the room. On the other side of the room is a bed supported on a low beechwood frame, with a white comforter and memory foam pillows. There's a paper screen sectioning off the last part of the room and he slides it open, finding a chest of drawers with two sets of clothes inside.

One's a pencil grey pyjamas, with an impossibly soft lining and the other, he presumes, is for when he gets off the train tomorrow, to be taken to God knows where. It's a black jumpsuit, with the Game's logo stitched into the breast pocket and his district number sewn in just underneath. He imagines Jane must have the same thing in her room, and his hands shake when he remembers why he's here. The amazing carpet had made him forget for a second, but this brings him back to reality. He slams the drawer shut, sinks down onto the ridiculous bed and cups his face in his hands, middle fingers pinching at his nose.

Pull yourself together, Byers, this isn't a vacation.

"Found the jumpsuit, huh?" A lesser man might've startled, but Jonathan has the art of looking unfazed down to a science, so there's no way Hopper would know if he did.

"I can't believe I forgot." He mutters into his hands, not looking up.

"It was a shock to my system, my first time too. I let myself get distracted by the amenities because it was a new thing, and managed to block out the important stuff. I wanted to forget, honestly, because

I didn't want it to be happening to me. For a second, I allowed myself the illusion that this was the best dream I'd ever had, because it was easier."

He makes his way next to Jonathan and plops himself down. He smells like scotch and smoke, which brings to mind memories of his dad, only more expensive. "You're allowed one of those moments, so it's best to get it out of ya system early, so it's done when the real Games start. And they start the second you get off this train. You've got to have a clear head going forward because they're going to fuck around in there as soon as they can, because that's what they do. " He goes into his breast pocket and pulls out a manila envelope and hands it to Jonathan. "Study up, kid, the Games await."

He leaves with that, making Jonathan feel unmoored and so, so confused.

He breaks the seal on the envelope and tips the contents out. There are 10 holo-discs inside it as well as a printed dossier to read. Jonathan barely finished First School when his dad left, which is why he's not so good with reading, so he puts that on one side and hunts for a port to put the discs in. He finds it completely by accident, touching the wall as he tries to move the chest of drawers out of the way and it lights up with the Hunger Games logo.

The screen flickers once, and a new graphic appears, displaying the words: INSERT DISCS HERE, with an arrow pointing down to a slight indentation in the wall. Before he can follow the instructions though, he's interrupted by a knock on the doorframe.

Jane's standing there, already dressed in her assigned pyjamas, an envelope clutched in one hand, and bottom lip trapped between her teeth.

"Can I watch these with you?"" She asks, shaking the envelope so as to clear any misconceptions to what she may be referring to. "I don't really want to watch them by myself."

He's not sure what he's supposed to say to that so he simply nods, and gestures to the bed, gathering his own discs and setting them down on the dresser.

"Let me just change, yeah?" He says, wanting to prolong this for as

long as he can. He knows that the second he sees his competition, it'll be over, and this whole thing will really be real. He doesn't want to think this way, but he does. He changes quickly, and rummages through his discs until he finds the one clearly marked 001 and slides it into the wall. Jane seems to have figured out quicker than he had about the controls in the walls, because she places a hand against the wall behind the bed and it lights up instantly, displaying another indentation.

"Let's do this." He proclaims, but otherwise makes no moves.

"There's candy in the second drawer." Jane pronounces after a full minute of Jonathan standing still and doing nothing.

Intrigued, Jonathan slides the drawer open, and indeed, candy. He's never really had before, maybe once when he was little, but he doesn't remember much beyond the fact that his dad had gotten real mad at his mom, going on about wasted money and chucking it all on the ground. He pushes the thought down as he usually does and uses his shirt as a basket to carry as much of it as he can to the bed and deposits it at Jane's feet.

"M'lady." He pronounces grandly, making a sweeping gesture with his hand.

She giggles, and it's the purest sound he's ever heard in his life.

He hands her a bag of chocolate balls and selects one for himself before he settles down next to her. She presses the little triangle on the remote and immediately the room's lights dim and the video starts to play.

Before they get really into it, Flo's ridiculously blonde head peers around the corner, asking them where Hopper is. Having not seen him since he gave them the discs, both shrug and try to watch on.

They're once again interrupted by Flo, this time hauling Hopper in by his arm and plunking him down in one of the handy chairs.

"You're supposed to watch this with them, Hopper, you know this."

"Then why do I get two envelopes?"

“Must we do this every year?” Flo’s more animated than she’d been all day, forgetting for a moment that’s she’s supposed to be this prim and proper person, and staring Hopper down. Jane dutifully pauses the game tape to watch the much more interesting live one happening right now.

“That one-on-one spiel is total garbage and you know it. Besides, 011 hasn’t won this game since me.” He shouts, voice hard, eyes like jagged glass. The bottom drops out of Jonathan’s stomach at that candour, hating the acknowledgement of his fears.

“C’mon, children, let’s see what we’re up against, shall we?” Flo states, clapping her hands loudly, voice over-bright, overcompensating to make up for Hopper’s words.

Hopper tries to sneak out, but Flo doesn’t even turn around when she jabs a finger at the couch, bracelets jangling together at the movement.

“Sit.”

They fall into an uncomfortable silence, broken only by the crinkle of packets as Jonathan and Jane try to settle in.

*

The first video starts normally, after a brief monologue by President Mouthbreather himself, with a wide zoom of all the tributes packed into the Square. Jonathan notes that they all look well-fed, stand ramrod straight and just generally give off a smug vibe. It’s no surprise if you consider that District 001’s been known to produce the most victors, having won 38 of the last 73. The other 35 had been divided amongst the other districts, with the number of wins dropping the lower the districts go. Even their escort represents that – she’s young, probably just out of reaping age (if she’d been born in a district), with a dress that looks like it’s made entirely out of gold fringe. Her hair is a deep sea-green colour, flowing all the way down her back, creating the illusion of an ocean with every step she takes. Her face is ethereally pale, made harsher by the black lipstick she wears. It’s probably the height of fashion in the Capitol and the viewers must love it. The girl that gets called up is beautiful with

rich coffee-coloured skin, dressed in a blood red gown that has a diamond cut out strategically, exposing her toned abs and belly-ring. She has high cheekbones and grey-green eyes, her silky black hair tied into a bun on top of her head. Her name is Lexi Strangelove, and she's obviously this year's trained tribute. Sometimes it happens like that, where the Career winds up being the one chosen. No one volunteers in her place.

The boy who's called up next is less remarkable, a little twelve year old boy that still looks like he could kill Jonathan, despite that fact.

This time, when asked for volunteers, someone does.

It's immediately obvious why he's a Career, he practically oozes 'Born Killer' vibes, it's in everything he does – the clearness of his voice as he volunteers, the slow, almost lazy way he strolls to the stage, the set of his jaw. This, Jonathan knows, is the one to watch out for.

The dark brown curls on top of his head are gelled down for the occasion, so there's nothing to hide the strong jaw or intense blue of his eyes, nothing to hide the excitement building in them and the underlying evil bubbling just below that apple-pie façade. He finds the camera and seems to stare directly into it, and a chill settles across Jonathan's skin, a chill that sinks deep into his bones and stays there long after the final video is put away.

His name is Billy Hargrove.

*

The next District, 002, while not as formidable, has still managed to churn out a solid chunk of victors, so Jonathan doesn't allow himself to waver. The same wide-zoom of the tributes, a tight-pan in of the escort, a blue-skinned male this time with spiky black and white hair and permanent dimples, in an asymmetrical black and white suit. He's very loud and very irritating, which actually helps to make Jonathan like Flo a little bit. At least she's not *that* .

Both people picked are saved by volunteers, who both look like they live to kill – 002 has always been known for their blood thirsty tributes and it would seem this year's tributes are no different. The girl's heels are weapons unto themselves, pointy and black,

ridiculously high, but she walks on them like they're natural extensions of her (incredibly long) legs. Her dress is a shade so black the camera struggles to pick it up, making her look like a pair of legs and a floating head. Her skin is alabaster white, making the strawberry-blonde in her hair appear blood-red. Nadya Puchkova is another one to keep in his crosshairs.

The other tribute's most notable for his exaggerated Mohawk, this blonde and pink thing, gelled within an inch of its life, and the tattoos up and down his arms. He's dressed in black too, but it's not nearly as intimidating as his partner's, but Jonathan is leery all the same. There must be a reason they picked him, so he can't afford to make judgement calls that could prove deadly. He'll wait on this one, for sure. His name's Axel Week.

*

District 003's tributes are nothing special, a little slip of a brown haired girl and a boy with freckles covering every inch of his face. They're probably the type of people who follow, and Jonathan knows how to watch out for that, having once shared breathing room with Steve Harrington. He'd filed away the way people flocked to him, not knowing that this would be the reason why. He sees it in their stances, the way they seem to look at each other almost unconsciously, or their mentor, as if silently asking what do we do now. To make a threat assessment on them, he has to see who they'll follow.

Tommy Holloway and Carol Lipchitz.

*

District 004 has a russet-haired slip of a thing that doesn't look like much. She seems to be a follower too, a pretty one at that, which is always an advantage in this game. Her partner is a slim shouldered boy who looks like a light breeze might blow him over. Their names are Nicole Watson and Eric Stottemeyer.

*

The next two districts tributes are bland, and don't set his alarms

ringing, so he doesn't really take them in.

*

District 008's tributes are a marked change from the usual fare. 008's produced a few victors, but most of those had been luck, but not so this year's. This year's show real promise, and it brings the anxiety that had dwindled down to a soft hum, back to the screeching it had been when watching 001.

The boy is a mountain, with dark skin and hair, and muscles that seem to protest the confines of his shirt with every breath he takes. He's a good head taller than all the other tributes so far, even 001's, and it's a clean-shaven one too. He has dimples, which pop out when he smirks, and an intense way about him. Jonathan notes him down as a possible ally. Despite the I-could-crush-you-into-dust-with-nothing-but-my-will-power vibe, there's an underlying something about him that Jonathan likes. He thinks, if worst comes to worst, this guy could probably protect Jane. When asked for his name, he says only Funshine, and he's big enough that the escort doesn't dare ask for a different one.

The other tribute has his hackles up from the moment she steps out of her group. She volunteers, which is a rarity this far down the district line, which makes her more dangerous than anyone else. Her hair is a deep plum shade, the half that isn't shaved off anyway, falling down one side in intricate curls. Her dress matches her hair and falls just short of her knees, which are draped in black tights. There's a run in one side, starting just where the hem of the dress ends and ending just above the strap of her heel. Jonathan thinks it might even have been done on purpose. He suspects everything she does is *on* purpose. She walks onto the stage like a cat, regal and elegant, all the while wearing a smile on her face that's nothing short of malicious.

She bites at the air when she gets to the escort, who takes a step back and bumps into the mic stand, setting off feedback. She chuckles at that, winking boldly, a move never seen outside of the higher districts. There's something about her, something eerie, and Jonathan hopes to never make an enemy out of her.

Her name is Kali Prasad.

*

District 009's boy is a sullen-faced boy, with dark skin and green eyes. He's got a face that could attract sponsors, but nothing else about him is really remarkable.

The girl is probably barely older than Jane, her dark hair twisted into a French braid, wearing a white dress that makes her features appear soft. Jonathan doesn't allow himself to be fooled, recognises the steel in her spine, and the dangerous curve of her lips. There's more to her than she's letting people see, so he shouldn't get too comfortable just yet.

Maxine Mayfield.

*

District 010's boy is nothing special, 14, tall, blonde, thin, and time will tell what happens to him. Jordi Phillips.

The girl, also blonde, with her hair in two buns, and make-up panda-like, makes an impression too. She's spritely, all long limbs and green eyes. She pops a bubble in her escort's face, and plants a kiss on her fellow tribute's unsuspecting mouth when he goes in for the handshake. There's something about her, something that she's trying to hide with her very personality, and it's something that could either make or break her in the Games. Dottie Wood.

She blows a kiss to the camera before she's led off and thus completes the tapes.

Let the Games begin.